

# **Laboratories for Educational Innovation: Honors Programs in the Netherlands**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**I**n Dutch universities, honors programs are a fast growing development. The first such programs started in 1993. Twenty years later a large number of programs are implemented at nearly all research universities and also at many universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. Recent data have revealed significant diversity in the types and structures of honors programs, many of which have functioned as laboratories of educational innovation within university-wide curricula and had positive spin-off effects on the regular curriculum and also on the transfer of talented students from secondary into higher education. Especially in the last decade, these spin-offs have had a strong influence on educational policy in the Netherlands at the primary and secondary as well as university levels.

In 2004 we described in this journal the increasing number of Dutch universities that had developed honors programs for the more motivated and able students wanting to do more than the regular curriculum offered them (Wolfensberger et al., "Honours Programs"). As a result, talented and motivated students were receiving many new opportunities. The development of honors programs was relevant as an important innovation in higher education with a wide influence on all university programs. Since 2004, this trend has continued to a degree that warrants an update of our earlier findings.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the Netherlands as well as most countries in the world, honors programs are designed to offer educational opportunities that are more

challenging and demanding than regular programs, and they are designed for motivated and gifted students who want more and have the capacity to do more than the regular curriculum requires from them. Selection and admission procedures are thus an important component of honors programs. Selectivity is a rather new phenomenon at most Dutch universities, and honors admission procedures have attracted criticism as they have done in the U.S. and other countries. Debates about elitism, equal access, social class, and diversion of resources to talented students have taken place among faculty and researchers as well as university administrations (Bastedo & Gumpert; Weiner; Long; Zeegers & Barron). In the rather egalitarian Dutch society, a focus on talent in the selection process is also an issue for discussion (Van Eijl et al., "Talent"). An emphasis on grades can lead to competition among students. Selectivity, competition, and differentiation in tuition are still new and unusual elements in the Dutch educational system, which has an emphasis on broad educational participation without entrance selection (Hofstede; Van Eijl et al., "Honours Programmes"; Van Eijl et al., "Talent"). Selection does take place at both the start and end of secondary education when students must take a national examination supplied and regulated by the government, but, once a student has obtained a diploma, he or she has traditionally been able to enter any university program. The Dutch situation has been unlike America, where high schools are typically inclusive but then students are admitted to universities based on standardized tests.

There have always been debates about what creates excellent educational outcomes: the motivation, giftedness, or social background of the students. Many argue that intelligence is not the exclusive or reliable predictor for success (Terman; Oden; Keesen; Carnicom & Snyder). Other predictors have included personality characteristics such as perseverance, creative thinking, and problem-solving ability (Reis & Renzulli; Campbell & Campbell) as well as organizational talent and the power to employ intelligence and wisdom (Sternberg, "Intelligence" and "WICS"). Mönks as well as Campbell et al. have described the significance of contexts like family, school, and friends. In relation to honors programs, one could also argue that it is appropriate or possible to decide who is gifted only after participation. Among these predictors, ours focuses on motivation and giftedness because our honors programs are specially developed for the more motivated and able students who want to do more than the regular program.

The development of honors programs in the Netherlands has been strongly influenced in the last decade by the implementation of the bachelor-master structure. All over Europe, the realization of the "European Higher Education Area" has been an important issue on the agenda of universities and other institutions of higher education. The main issue has been to implement a

structure of bachelor's and master's programs that will facilitate student mobility and comparison of grades. Implementation started in 1999 when the Ministers responsible for higher education from twenty-nine European countries signed the Bologna Declaration, agreeing on important joint objectives for the development of a single, cohesive European Higher Education Area by 2010. In 2003, the Ministers from thirty-three European countries met in Berlin to review the progress achieved and to set priorities and new objectives for the coming years, with a view to speeding up the European Higher Education Area. The Netherlands was way ahead of many of the other countries because, in nearly all Dutch institutions, bachelor-master programs for all new students had been introduced in 2002 along with many of the reforms associated with this process.

In the Netherlands, all research universities at present have honors programs for four main reasons. First, with implementation of the bachelor-master, many undergraduate programs were broadened, creating new opportunities for honors programs that allow for enrichment. Second, it is becoming more important for students to distinguish themselves in order, for instance, to be admitted to selective master programs in the Netherlands or abroad, and honors programs provide opportunities for students to achieve this kind of distinction through, for instance, an honors certificate or diploma upon graduation. Third, political discussions about the knowledge economy and the need to strengthen the Dutch and European innovative capacity have led to a renewed emphasis on talent and research. Excellence in teaching and research has been on the political agenda of the government in projects like "Ruim Baan voor Talent" ("Make Way for Talent") and Sirius (about a hundred million dollars for developing talent programs in higher education), and honors programs have fitted well into this agenda. Traditionally, the emphasis in the Netherlands has always been on equality, equity, and access (Hofstede), but the new focus on excellence supports the rapid development of honors programs at Dutch universities. Maybe in the end Dutch culture will be able to add excellence to the list without displacing the other traditional emphases. Fourth and finally, the growth of honors programs at Dutch universities may be explained by the fact that the Anglo-Saxon Higher Education system served as a model for the European bachelor-master implementation, and honors programs are a widespread phenomenon in this model. Considering the forward position of the Netherlands in the introduction of the bachelor-master system and in the implementation of honors, honors programs are likely to spread to other European countries as they adopt the system.

Dutch honors programs demonstrate a great variety in pedagogical design and organization. Their main goal is to provide academic opportunities that challenge students to perform at their highest level of excellence.

Additional goals involve stimulating talent, attracting new teachers and students of outstanding academic ability, creating connections between educational programs, and providing a laboratory for educational experiments that can be adopted by regular programs. The latter is also cited as an important goal of honors programs in the United States: “[E]ducational innovation and honors have often been allied. The development of honors courses and curricula is necessarily an exercise in innovation.” (Austin, *Honors Programs* 16; cf. also Dennison). Innovation is one of the NCHC’s Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program “The program serves as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. When proven successful, such efforts in curriculum and pedagogical development can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus.”

Given the explicit or implicit goal of innovation, we should expect honors programs to generate spin-off effects on regular programs. Demonstration that honors programs are a source of innovation along with understanding of their spin-off effects strengthens the position of and appreciation for these programs; it may also help to refute the point of view that they are exclusively for “a happy few” participating students. At the same time, while we recognize that all students profit from the challenge of learning to do their own thinking and making their own choices, we also know that not all practices in honors programs should be transferred to regular programs: “For gifted students, the content level involved in the discovery and problem solving could be at a higher level of abstraction than possible for the average student. . . . Also, Shore and Delcourt note that ability grouping, acceleration, and differential programming are particularly useful for gifted students” (Gallagher 688). Our focus is on those innovations that have, in fact, been successfully realized in regular programs and had their origin in honors programs, whether or not the adaptation was planned at the outset.

The main research questions of this paper are the following:

- To what extent do Dutch honors programs function as laboratories for educational innovation in regular programs?
- What kinds of innovations and changes in regular programs do honors programs generate?
- What characteristics of honors programs are related to this spin-off effect?

These questions are addressed after an explanation of our research methods and an update on the characteristics of Dutch honors programs.

## RESEARCH METHODS

We selected honors programs specifically defined as programs developed to offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than regular programs. A first inventory of all honors programs at Dutch research-based universities was made in 2003, the most recent inventory in 2010 (Wolfensberger et al., "Learning"). The inventory is, we believe, rather complete; some programs that were currently being developed have now been included as well as information received until summer 2012. Because of the fast development in recent years, we expect great changes in the near future. For this reason, we mainly report qualitative findings.

The first focus in the analysis was on the programs and their characteristics: target group, educational methods, subjects, selection and admission procedures, duration, assessment, recognition, awards, and the innovation function. The research was limited to programs that consist of a series of courses or modules, and individual "honors" assignments within courses were not included. We made an inventory of innovations that were adopted in regular programs and had their origin in honors programs. These innovations were categorized according to content, pedagogy, and structure of the regular program. In the inventory we also asked about factors that stimulated the innovations.

We have used the data of a previous study (Wolfensberger et al, "Honours Programs"), a 2012 inventory of honors programs in research universities (Wolfensberger et al., "Learning"), and an overview by the Audit Committee Sirius in 2012. For the honors programs in the universities of applied sciences, we used the overview of the audit committee and the inventory by Wolfensberger, de Jong, and Drayer. Additional information came from documents, websites, and interviews with teachers, coordinators, and directors of honors programs. Examples of honors program spin-offs were also derived from a study on the pedagogy of honors education (Van Eijl et al, "Talent").

## CHARACTERISTICS OF HONORS PROGRAMS AT DUTCH UNIVERSITIES

The inventory resulted in about 50 honors programs and colleges at 11 of the 13 research-based universities and about 40 programs at 19 of the 40 universities of applied sciences. Honors programs are rather new in the Netherlands: the first started in 1993, but many programs started after 2008. This recent growth in programs is related to a fostering policy of the universities and the government and also by the introduction of the bachelor-master system. Universities and students are discovering that it is becoming more

important to distinguish themselves in the competition for international master studies.

Between our study in 2004 and now, the number of programs at research universities increased from 25 to about 50. Even more important, the number of students increased to about 5000, roughly 3% of each cohort. Utrecht University is the frontrunner in this development with more than 15%. A new phenomenon is the development of honors programs at the Universities of Applied Sciences. These 19 universities, which focus on professional education, saw the number of programs increase from almost zero in 2004 to about 40 in 2010. All 19 have programs within one or more departments; 8 have programs that involve students of all departments. The number of students is still low but rapidly growing (Wolfensberger et al., “Learning”). The programs focus on excellent professionals as well as personal development. The development of this innovation is attractive for many students, faculty, and administrators.

Dutch honors programs are rather uniformly distributed among the disciplines, including medical, scientific, and technological fields. Programs in the liberal arts often combine specialization with multidisciplinary study; University College Utrecht and University College Maastricht are two examples that provide this kind of integrative combination. Recently, leadership and personal development are becoming more common elements of honors education (Wolfensberger et al., “Learning”).

The key characteristic of honors programs we included in our study is that they have been developed for the more motivated and talented students, and this purpose is reflected in their selection procedures, study tasks, and forms of assessment and certification. The programs differ in duration, structure, types of students involved, years of study in which they are scheduled, number of credits required, total credit hours, educational methods, and assessment, but, despite all these differences, they share a number of common characteristics. Many of these characteristics are found in the United States (Austin, “Orientation”), but honors programs in the Netherlands are more likely to focus on the disciplines and research activities, to be additional to the regular curriculum, and to include a fast-growing number of honors master’s programs. Here is a summary of our findings on these characteristics:

- a. Honors programs use mainly small-scale educational methods varying from individual education to groups of twenty students, thus enhancing the interaction between the participants and between students and teacher as well as providing more opportunities to follow the individual interests of students. Active participation is evident, e.g., in discussion and feedback, presentations of research, and excursions. Peer-interaction is an important characteristic of honors in the Netherlands.

- b. Many context-specific and pedagogical innovations as well as up-to-date content are found in honors programs. Special attention is paid to academic skills, interdisciplinary pedagogy, reflective student portfolios, student participation, challenging course content, new ways of assessment, peer feedback, and discussion among peers. In a number of programs, special attention is paid to research, design, and other professional competencies. Quite a number of programs offer opportunities for honors students to do research at an earlier stage and at a more advanced level than in regular programs. Frequently a connection is made with master's or PhD programs. Honors programs are often perceived as nurseries for research talent.
- c. Honors programs are more demanding in content and in quantity. In many honors programs students receive "honors credits," which have no legal status but are testimonials to the time spent in the honors program. However, in an increasing number of honors programs students receive grade points for having participated in these programs instead of the regular programs. Completion of an honors program is typically acknowledged with a testimonial, a certificate, an additional phrase on the diploma, or a special diploma. Honors graduation is sometimes an official academic event, e.g., the vice-chancellor presents the honors diploma to the students.
- d. Honors programs use different types of admission criteria including GPA and level of motivation as revealed in letters of application and interviews. Letters of recommendation from mentors also play a role. We did not find programs which use only an average number of credits or average GPA.
- e. Some honors programs are meant for non-freshman students, but others are meant for all bachelor's students. Regular bachelor's programs at Dutch research universities take three years after six years of secondary school or, at universities of applied sciences, four years after typically five years of secondary school. All students have to complete a bachelor's thesis or other substantial capstone assignment. Most programs have a coordinator or director, usually a teacher or a coach in the program, who organizes and develops the program. Coaches encourage the students to work on their academic achievement and to be involved in new challenges.
- f. Many honors programs involve innovation in content and pedagogy that can then be transferred to regular programs. Innovation is usually not stated as an objective of an honors program but is certainly one of the intended effects.

## STUDENT POPULATION: DIFFERENCES IN ETHNICITY AND GENDER

In 2009, 3.2 % of the new bachelor's students in Dutch research universities participated in honors programs or colleges (Wolfensberger et al., "Learning"). In 2011 the highest percentages were at Utrecht University, where participation was 15%, and at Maastricht University, where it was 9.1% (Utrecht University Board). The national percentage grew one third in 2009–2011 (Audit Committee Sirius). The number of students in honors colleges is rather large: each year 230 students start at Utrecht University College; 190 at Roosevelt Academy; 200 at Maastricht University College; 200 at Leiden University College; and 200 at Amsterdam University College. Twente University will start in 2013 with 60–100 students. At the master's level, four front-running universities now involve about 2% of the students. At the universities of applied sciences, the percentage of participating honors students was lower in 2011 (about 1.5–2%) because they started later, but the percentage is rapidly rising, the highest now being at Hanzehogeschool with about 950 students, which is 6.2% of the total enrollment. The overall dropout rate from honors programs is reported to be between 10% and 30%, mainly because of schedule conflicts among students and problems in the development of the new programs. The total number of Dutch honors students in 2011 was about 7,000.

The numbers and percentages related to honors should be considered in the general context that, in 2009, 63% of the Dutch cohort of pupils went into higher education (67% of the women, 58% of the men). The percentage of non-western women is about the same as western women while the percentage of non-western men is behind but growing (Vogels & Turkenburg). Although we have no overall data on gender and ethnicity in the population of honors students in the Netherlands, our impression, based on visits and interviews, is that the male/female ratio is about 40/60 and that non-western students are still under-represented in honors programs.

## FINANCING HONORS PROGRAMS

We see a lot of diversity in the way honors programs are funded. So far, some have been financed by grants for educational innovation, some by the central administration of a university, and some by a department. Until now, there has been little or no differentiation in the costs for students; all EU students in Dutch universities pay about 1771 euros (\$2,270 U.S. dollars) per year for their higher education. Almost none of the honors programs require students to pay extra for participation. No special grants are available for honors students. However, general budget reductions in higher education have led to new debates on the financing of honors programs.

## BREEDING GROUND FOR RESEARCHERS AND PROFESSIONALS

In many honors programs at research universities, special attention is paid to research competencies. Sometimes students get experience in research by spending a visiting semester at a research institution so that they can discover whether they are really interested and competent in research. The university benefits by hosting a breeding ground for highly talented students; after a positive evaluation of their activities by the student and university, many students enter a master's and then PhD program.

In honors programs at universities of applied sciences, special attention is often paid to professional competencies, creating a new initiative for faculty, students, and professional organizations. This development is especially relevant in a knowledge-intensive society where professional competencies are fast-changing not only in science and technology but also in medical, educational, and entrepreneurial domains.

## A TYPOLOGY OF HONORS PROGRAMS AT DUTCH UNIVERSITIES

Based on analysis of the data in our inventory, we have drawn up a typology of honors programs. We can distinguish three types of honors programs: disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary.

In disciplinary honors programs, deepening the understanding of subjects, methodologies, and research within a discipline is the main goal. Students usually take honors courses as add-ons to their regular program. The departments encourage and finance these kinds of honors programs, and participating teachers and students originate from the department.

In interdisciplinary honors programs, the focus is on subjects and themes that include and go beyond different disciplines and also on interdisciplinary methodologies. These programs are an add-on for students wanting to broaden their academic education beyond the scope of their main subject. These types of honors program are organized and financed at the level of the university as a whole. In most, students and teachers are drawn from all over the university.

Most of the multidisciplinary programs are liberal arts and sciences colleges, offering a full substitute for regular programs and a full honors bachelor's degree. Connections between the disciplines are not an explicit issue for discussion. Most of these programs are a full substitute for regular programs, and most are liberal arts and sciences colleges offering a full honors bachelor's degree. Selection is strict, and students must maintain a high GPA. These full-degree programs are analogous to some honors colleges in the

U.S. and are distinct from the other honors programs. Another kind of multi-disciplinary program is the so-called TWIN program that leads to a double-major bachelor's degree, e.g., math and physics.

## SPIN-OFF EFFECTS IN REGULAR PROGRAMS

We have categorized spin-off effects into three main fields of innovation: course content, pedagogy, and program structure. By spin-off in course content we mean the development of a new course or a change in the content of a course in the regular program that is directly induced by the honors program. By spin-off in pedagogy, we mean changes in the activities of teachers and students in non-honors courses. Spin-off in the field of program structure includes changes in the overall structure, sequence, and outline of a program.

### SPIN-OFF EFFECTS IN COURSE CONTENT

Disciplinary honors programs appear to have had sizable spin-off effects in course content, where a strong content relationship exists between the disciplinary honors program and the regular program. The innovative and experimental content of honors programs is in most cases closely connected to the regular program and can be easily integrated into it after proven success.

Many interdisciplinary honors programs develop new courses on interdisciplinary subjects. Those courses aim at a deeper understanding of interdisciplinary relationships between subjects and are specifically meant for students in the honors program. Some of these courses eventually become an option for students in the regular program as regular courses become duplicates of honors courses.

### Examples

A group of students in the honors program of the Department of Geosciences at Utrecht University did their research projects at universities in Bergen, Norway, and Barcelona, Spain. They discovered that considerably more attention was paid to qualitative methods of research abroad than at Utrecht University. Back in Utrecht, they started a discussion of research methods with their teachers, leading to discussion in the departmental newsletter. As a result, the next group of honors students was offered special lectures on qualitative methods of research. Within a year, these special lectures were made available to all 150 students in the regular curriculum. Ten years later, all undergraduate students now do a final research project and write a thesis, using a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approach.

Another example is the development of student-driven courses. Undergraduate students discovered that honors students learned to take responsibility for their own learning by choosing a course topic and faculty

member and together designing course assignments, e.g., papers, fieldwork, and films. Now all senior undergraduate students and also faculty members have the freedom to create such courses.

A more broad-based example has occurred in the same honors program in Geosciences, a disciplinary program (Harms & Hogenstijn) that evolved into a three-year interdisciplinary program with about sixty students (Wolfensberger & Gorp). Despite many changes, the core of the program remained the same: evoking excellence by connecting cognitive, personal, and professional development. As citizenship is an important element in the program, an honors tradition has been interest in ethical and affective issues, e.g., in dialogues about science and its application (Nussbaum). Honors students have introduced these elements of their honors education into their regular classes, resulting in grants and prizes for the Department of Geosciences.

In the double-major TWIN programs in the Department of Science at Utrecht University, the spin-off effects flow across disciplines. Typically, the TWIN-programs offer a rare opportunity for faculty members of two scientific fields to cooperate and co-create an educational program. TWIN-programs require a rethinking of disciplinary basics as well as fine-tuning of the content.

## **SPIN-OFF EFFECTS IN PEDAGOGY**

Most of the disciplinary honors programs appear also to have had sizable spin-off effects in pedagogy. Teachers have acquired new understanding and skills in instructional methods, assignments, coaching of students, peer feedback, and honors communities. They reported transferring these skills rather easily into the standard program. Spin-off is also stimulated by the flow of information between honors and non-honors students; honors students function as agents of innovation. The spin-off effects of disciplinary honors programs become visible in a relatively short time, and we found that departments as a whole profit from the educational innovations.

For interdisciplinary programs, it was difficult to get reliable data about the spin-off effects on pedagogy. However, it appears that teachers in such honors programs become more conscious of their responsibility to raise the educational quality within their regular program. The teachers and students of these interdisciplinary programs come from various departments but join in the program. These teachers take their new understanding and skills in the field of pedagogy back to their regular program, but, because the setting in their department is different and their students have virtually no communication with those in the honors program, it is likely to be more difficult for them to apply their new skills. However, we found some clear instances of spin-off effects, especially when new regular programs were designed or old ones revised.

## Example

The University of Amsterdam uses its interdisciplinary honors program for motivated first-year students as a breeding ground for different kinds of instructional activities, e.g., the digital portfolio, that have then been disseminated throughout the university. In this case, the spin-off effects have also influenced the honors program itself, which has grown from involving six departments to being implemented in almost all departments of the university.

## SPIN-OFF EFFECTS IN PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Honors colleges appeared to provide excellent contexts for experiments and innovations in interdisciplinary subjects, instructional methods, challenging assignments, and course organization. The success of such innovations in some cases led to replication in the university as a whole. Students in these full-degree colleges work only with other honors students and do not interact with other students at the “mother university”; hence, they do not function as agents of innovative change in the regular program. However, faculty members often have positions in both the honors college and host institution, which means that they can function as liaisons. We found indeed important examples of innovations along these lines.

## Example

University College Utrecht (UCU) has influenced not only other university programs at Utrecht University but also honors programs and colleges in other universities. This first honors college in the Netherlands, despite initial resistance to it within Utrecht University, found a solid base when it proved to be a success: the learning results were outstanding; the students were highly motivated and made excellent progress; and the faculty, who were selected because they were known as outstanding teachers, were positive about this kind of learning and teaching. The students, the University Board, and many faculty involved in UCU showed their commitment to this innovative program in discussions about large-scale curriculum reform when the bachelor-master system was introduced. After this green light, UCU became a breeding ground for exceptional teachers and students. UCU had attracted a group of teachers who had authority among their peers and showed enthusiasm for trying out new educational concepts. As indicated in evaluation data, the diversity of the student population, many of whom were international students brought up in different educational systems, forced the teachers and staff of UCU to experiment with instructional content and form. The selection system, which did not exist in regular programs elsewhere in the Netherlands, brought a capable and motivated as well as diverse group of students together and facilitated this experimentation. The interaction between

teachers from different academic disciplines was also a source of inspiration for spin-off. Teachers thus gained experiences that were later transplanted into regular programs.

With this international bachelor's program at an honors level, Utrecht University obtained a wide-ranging expertise in liberal arts and sciences learning, a new educational concept in Dutch universities. When Utrecht University introduced the bachelor-master structure in the whole university, the UCU program played the role of a visionary model for the new programs, specifically in its emphasis on a broad spectrum of academic education and skills; freedom of choice in requirements; coaching of the students; more tests and feedback within the courses; and marked reduction in the number of students who had to repeat a course.

Many other research universities also introduced spin-off honors colleges—e.g., Maastricht, Amsterdam, Leiden, and Twente—and Utrecht University started a second one, the Roosevelt Academy in Middelburg. Utrecht University also started to implement the concept of honors colleges at the department level, e.g., the Utrecht Law College (Van Gestel et al.). The Junior College Utrecht was founded as a bridge between secondary education and research universities (Van der Valk and Pilot), Hanzehogeschool will start a Junior Honors Academy as a bridge to the universities of applied sciences.

Another example is the Honors College Amsterdam, a combined liberal arts and sciences honors college of the University of Amsterdam and the VU University Amsterdam, both large research universities. Started in 2010, this college offers a series of honors courses for bachelor-level students of both universities.

## **KEY ISSUES IN UNDERSTANDING THE SPIN-OFF EFFECTS**

At least four characteristics of honors programs are important to their spin-off effects on course content, pedagogy, and program structure.

### **INNOVATION AS AN AIM**

In many honors programs, the administration has implicitly or explicitly encouraged innovation. In seven of ten universities of applied sciences, innovation has been an explicit part of the mission from the start (Wolfensberger et al., "Learning"). While many interdisciplinary honors programs explicitly include innovation in their mission, others were established with a unique goal of some kind and stressing spin-off effects that would be counter-productive; even programs like this, though, often indicate that they see spin-off effects in regular programs. For example, the double-degree programs of the Department of Science at Utrecht University have demonstrated that teachers

who previously did not communicate very much now show more interaction about subject matter and pedagogy.

Many teachers and administrators involved in honors are also innovators, eager to experiment with new ideas and play a liaison role in the flow of ideas. Some are “early adopters and persons with authority” whose role is “to decrease uncertainty about a new idea by adopting it and conveying a subjective evaluation of the innovation to near-peers by means of interpersonal networks” (Rogers 240). These early adopters often work in honors programs as well as regular programs, hastening the communication and acceptance of innovations. Van Poucke indicates that, for an innovation to be successful, it needs to go through the full process of development, crystallization, and realization. Knowing and understanding an innovation—forming an opinion on it in the ‘safe’ environment of an honors program with a small group of enthusiastic students—makes it easier for a teacher to implement it in a regular program.

## **EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS: HONORS PROGRAMS AS BREEDING PLACES**

Spin-off effects are a consequence of honors programs that serve as breeding places for innovation, often transforming regular programs while the honors program continues to evolve even further. Honors programs like the one in Geosciences at Utrecht University mention this kind of spin-off effect in their mission statement, defining their honors program as a platform for innovation of regular programs.

We found that many honors teachers report being stimulated to use their creativity by working in honors and experiencing freedom as well as responsibility to create new courses that serve the needs of the students (Audit Committee). Pedagogical innovations and interdisciplinary courses are risky for teachers, but they transfer a wide range of innovations—reflective digital portfolios, personal tutors, challenging assignments, seminars, interdisciplinary student collaboration, talent coaching, research projects, peer discussions, peer feedback, peer teaching, peer assessment—to regular programs even when such transfer is not an official policy.

## **CREDITS OR NO CREDITS: INFLUENCE ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF INNOVATIONS**

One possibility is that innovation is more easily accepted by and implemented in regular programs when no credits are given to the honors students, the assumption being that the students’ intrinsic motivation is higher when no credits are given. Another advantage of this possibility is that, in the Dutch

educational system, there are fewer administrative obstacles (such as accreditation procedures) when no credits are given. However, giving credits to all honors activities consolidates these programs more firmly in the university structure.

Honors programs vary widely in assignment of credits and/or grades. In many cases, honors assessments or credits have no influence on students' grades in their regular program. Programs also differ in the way they are completed: in some, at least a part of the honors study load is an add-on; in others, honors students do a part of their regular curriculum in an honors format with assignments that are different and more demanding; in still others, students do the honors program and the regular curriculum simultaneously. Students sometimes receive so-called "honorary credits," which are not official credits but do indicate the workload of the course, and some programs give "extra credits," which are official but can be used only for electives. However, most multidisciplinary programs offer a full curriculum instead of the regular program, and these programs do give official credits and provide an official bachelor's diploma.

## **SELECTION AND MOTIVATION: FOSTERING SPIN-OFF EFFECTS**

Most honors programs have selection and admission procedures that result in significant self-selection before the official procedure even starts. A student has to enroll, show some intellectual achievement, and write a letter of motivation. Above-average grades are required in most programs and provide information about intellectual performance, but they do not reveal academic potential, creativity, and personal qualities. In admissions procedures, therefore, all Dutch institutions look beyond grades and place high value on motivation. Students selected on the basis of motivation rather than grades are usually seeking a challenge to perform at their highest level of excellence, and they appreciate working with other strongly motivated students, as shown, for example, in the honors evaluations of the Department of Geosciences at Utrecht University (Van Eijl et al., "Talent"). These students are committed to each other and to their subject content, so teachers are willing to experiment.

Student participation and feedback are especially useful to faculty members when they implement innovations. Birdwell-Pheasant argues,

. . . the single most important distinction between honors and non-honors courses are [sic] the honors students: dedicated, motivated, fascinated students with solid foundations in prior work and with new creative insights. They spark each other (and the professor), and

learning takes on a whole new dimension . . . The essence of honors programs, I believe, is putting gifted people in touch with one another.” (25)

The selection procedures are thus crucial to creating a context in which educational innovations can be developed and tested. Self-reflection and peer interaction/feedback are important outcomes when mistakes are allowed and then used to improve performance in a safe learning process. Furthermore, as the courses are often add-ons, the consequences of failure are rather low.

In our study of the innovative capacity of honors programs, we mainly focused on characteristics of the programs themselves. However, we found evidence that the way an honors program is integrated into a department is also important for its innovative capacity (Van Poucke). An honors program is often perceived as a network that fosters relationships between students and faculty, thereby facilitating spin-off effects (Fenwick). The formal and informal exchange of knowledge and experience among teachers, students, honors directors, and university administrators appears to be important for successful spin-off effects. The concept of “learning organizations” (Senge) helps explain the successful spin-off effects and innovation process at Utrecht University, focusing on the kinds of innovative people involved and on the phases of innovation: (1) initiation (reaching consensus, providing a concrete scenario for innovation, and deciding on process factors); (2) implementation; and (3) consolidation. At Utrecht University the focus of Havelock and Huberman on infrastructure, authority, and consensus also provided a better understanding of how to foster of the process. The high level of faculty authority from the start of Utrecht University College made a big difference in the spin-off effects into the regular programs (Pilot). The first results of spin-off then strengthened the implementation of further innovations and the general focus on talent development in the university and beyond; as Havelock & Huberman suggest, success breeds success.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our study has shown that educational innovations in course content, pedagogy, and program structure are both characteristics and outcomes of honors programs; after their obvious advantages had proven successful, they appeared to spread readily into regular programs as participants adopted and disseminated the new ideas.

We found five important features of honors programs regarding spin-off effects in regular programs:

1. Inclusion of innovation in the programmatic mission, whether explicit or implicit;

2. Intellectual quality and passion that create appeal for students, even when no credits are given, and for teachers, who then promote innovation throughout the university;
3. Selection process (including self-selection) that creates a safe learning environment in which experimentation can take place;
4. Quality and dynamism of educational innovations that produce continuous programmatic change as well as university-wide dissemination; and
5. Long-term impacts on national educational policy to promote academic excellence and talent development at all levels of education.

Honors programs are rapidly developing in Dutch universities as a way to evoke excellence in students and serve as laboratories of innovation. We expect that this interest in honors programs will grow and evolve, leading to new questions:

- Will the spin-off from honors programs concentrate on bachelor students or also involve more master's-level students in honors programs (Van Ginkel et al., "Honors in the Master's")? Will honors programs involve all domains in the same way or will there be large differences between humanities, social sciences, science and technology, and medical sciences? What will be the position of liberal arts honors colleges and programs? Will the universities of applied sciences be successful in developing honors programs related to the professional excellence, and what spin-off will these programs provide?
- How will the institutions finance honors programs: institutionally, at the departmental level, and/or with outside funding? How much does the cost of education for an honors student differ from that of regular students? How can we show that a higher cost is 'worth it' for the institution as a whole? Should students pay higher tuition for honors programs? Should honors programs in the Netherlands follow the models of the U.S. and Canada where honors replaces regular courses rather than being an add-on?
- How can the assessment of learning outcomes be organized in a valid and reliable way? What are the best forms of assessment and certification? Do they differ in important ways from those employed in the regular programs and courses, and, if they do, what implications does that difference have for innovations in the regular programs?
- How is further spin-off related to the issue of the added value of honors programs? What kind of feedback or evaluation of their efforts should students receive, and should they get evaluation in the form of a grade? Can grades be an obstacle to risk-taking and even participation? How can the

organization and the rules for giving credit best be regulated? When all universities offer honors programs, how can the differences between programs and certificates be described and perhaps standardized? How can quality assurance be organized? What procedures are advisable for developing extracurricular activities?

- What should be the authority and responsibility of honors units in the structure of the departments and the university? What will be the role of a Dutch organization of honors programs and colleges: organizing seminars and conferences on honors, evoking excellence, encouraging scholarly activities, sharing experiences, and/or fostering innovation? How can such an organization play a role in professional development of honors teachers across Dutch universities?

Recent developments in Dutch honors programs have stimulated many research activities in the past years on important issues in honors education and opportunities for spin-off: e.g., developing latent talent (Coppoolse et al.), professional excellence (Paans et al.), challenging assignments (Scager et al., “Challenging”), citizenship related to global mindedness (Schutte et al.), honors communities (Van Ginkel et al., “Building”), selection (Scager et al., “Do Honors Students”) and professional development of honors teachers (Ten Berge & Scager; Kazemier).

We look forward to continued vitality in research about honors and to expanding our findings about innovation in honors not just in the Netherlands but in comparison with U.S. honors programs, which have been offered across the country for many years, and with newer honors programs around the globe. We assume that the spin-off effects we have seen in the Netherlands are characteristic of honors education everywhere, and we look forward to research that investigates and, we hope, confirms this assumption.

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